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ABSTRACT

Demographic changes between 1970 and 1980 will affect New York rural schools in the 1980's. In the 1970's overall New York state population declined nearly 4% (about 700,000 persons), but rural areas gained about 100,000. Rural New York school districts now serve a population of about 2.5 million, a 5% increase since 1970. During the 1980's, Americans will continue to disperse into rural areas. The number of preschool children will increase (probably 5-10% in rural New York), but since the birth rate is at a record low, probably only modest increases in elementary school population will result. The number of teenagers is declining (probably by 25% in rural New York), which will mean fewer high school students and that some colleges located in rural areas will have difficulty surviving. A larger majority of the adult population and a larger fraction of the labor force are women, many of whom are single parents, so it will be harder to find school volunteers, and the need for after-school programs will be greater. The number of students may diminsh, but the number of students with emotional problems because of separation or divorce at home is likely to increase. (MH)

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Demographic Change and the Quality of Rural Schools

by Peter Francese

New York State and its school districts are in the midst of profound demographic and social change. This change is affecting the size and character of rural school districts throughout the state.

A changing population creates both opportunities and problems in education. Fortunately, however, demographic change takes place over many years and can be anticipated and planned for. There is no need to be surprised by declining school enrollments or a sudden increase in class size--you can read these trends in the numbers years before they affect you.

Consider the following facts: The U.S. grew 11 percent during the 1970s, but New York State declined nearly 4 percent, losing about 700,000 persons. That was a greater loss than any state has ever experienced in history, and the loss was greater than the population of six of our states. But this loss was entirely in the urban areas of New York. The rural parts of the state gained about 100,000 persons.

For the first time in 160 years, our nation's nonmetropolitan communities grew faster than its metropolitan areas. The nonmetropolitan population increased 15 percent between 1970 and 1980, while metropolitan areas grew only 10 percent. About one quarter of the U.S. population lives outside of metropolitan areas. In New York State, 90 percent of the population lives in

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metropolitan areas which, as a whole, declined 5 percent during the 1970s, while the nonmetropolitan areas increased 6 percent.

About 1.7 million New Yorkers live in the state's nonmetropolitan areas. If we add a number of smaller metropolitan counties to that figure, it appears that rural school districts in New York serve a population of about 2.5 million, an increase of about 5 percent since 1970.

New York State gave up five congressional seats because of its population losses during the seventies. Since the size of the House of Representatives is fixed, these seats went to states in the South and West. Those regions gained 17 House seats at the expense of the Northeast and North Central regions. The center of U.S. population, which had been in the East since the first census in 1790, but always drifting West, has finally crossed the Mississippi River. This crossing is symbolic of the fact that for the first time in history a majority of our people live in the South and the West. Therefore, a majority of congressional representatives are now from there as well.

The most important consequence of these regional shifts is the aging of our Northern and Midwestern states. When a region or state stops growing, its population often begins to age. The state with the highest median age is, of course, Florida, but who would guess that the second highest is New Jersey. Pennsylvania, Connecticut and New York are not far behind.

It is a myth that all elderly people move to Florida.

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Even if all the people 65 and over in Florida had moved there from some other state, more than 90 percent of the elderly in the U.S. would have stayed right where they are.

But the population is not just aging, it is becoming more middle-aged. For the past 30 years we have had--and we will continue to have--the cycle of baby boom and baby bust and baby boom again, creating waves of people moving up through the age groups.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were about four million babies born a year. But by the 1970s, births had declined to about three million per year and the birth rate had also declined. The average American woman today has slightly less than 2 children in her lifetime, compared to an average of 3.7 children in the 1950s.

During the 1980s we expect the number of births to again approach four million a year, resulting in a 17 percent increase in little children. This is not because birth rates are going to rise, but because there are so many women in the childbearing ages. Simply put, it's the baby boom babies growing up and having babies.

This will have a major impact on the number of school-age children. For example, the population under five from 1970 to 1980 declined nationally by 5 percent, by 24 percent in New York State, and by 17 percent in the areas served by rural school districts.

From 1980 to 1990, preschoolers are projected to grow by 17 percent nationally, and by 5 to 10 percent in the area of New York State served by rural school districts. What

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this means is that while closed elementary schools may reopen in some parts of the country, that is highly unlikely to happen here.

If we look at children aged 5-9 (basically K-4) we see that they declined 16 percent nationally, fully 29 percent in New York State, and 24 percent in New York's rural school districts. But during this decade, we expect to see about a 12 percent growth nationwide, and for New York there may be slight growth later in the decade in this age group.

The 10-14 year olds declined 12 percent nationally, 18 percent in New York state and 15 percent in New York's rural school districts during the 1970s. The decline in this age group in New York state will be even greater during the 1980s, on the order of 20 to 25 percent. What this means is that for every 100 schoolchildren in this age group in 1970, there will be only 60 left in 1990.

The 15-19 year olds increased 11 percent nationally, only 2 percent statewide, but 10 percent in the rural school districts. This decade will see the 15 to 19 year olds decline by 33 percent in New York state. In the rural areas, the decline will probably be less. Still, the rural districts can expect to lose one out of every four high school students by the end of this decade.

There is actually some good news in these statistics. The best news from a societal point of view is that when there are fewer teenagers, each teenager is more highly valued by the rest of us. Fewer of them will be unemployed, fewer of them will drop out of high school, fewer of them

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will become pregnant, and fewer of them will turn to a life of crime. I am not painting a picture of a world free of juvenile delinquency, but there is no question that teenagers who come of age in this decade will have more economic opportunity than their too numerous predecessors.

Because of the shrinking number of teenagers, college enrollments have also begun to decline. Many of the small private colleges are located in rural areas, and these colleges may be hurt by shrinking enrollments. The colleges and universities in large cities will probably survive by focusing on adult education. But most small colleges in rural areas lack a sufficient population base to support a viable adult education program and, besides, New York state's community colleges and BOCES serve that market quite well. There may be many small colleges closing by the end of this decade.

Elementary and secondary school students live in families where there is at least one adult who supports the child through school. The adults are an important part of a school district, if for no other reason than that they vote on budgets and bond issues and attend school board meetings to speak their mind. But the present day family from which your students come is substantially different from the one they came from 10 or 20 years ago.

Households are growing in number, shrinking in size and changing in character. In a decade when New York State's population declined, its households increased 7 percent. Nationally households grew almost 2-1/2 times faster than

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the population.

As a result, household size is shrinking. The average household, which had over 3 persons in it in 1970, will have only 2.5 by 1990. Why? Because households are changing in character. There has been a large increase in the number of people who live alone or with people to whom they are not related. In New York State such nonfamily households increased 43 percent in the last decade, while married couple families fell by about 10 percent. The 1970s was known as the decade of divorce, and as a result families headed by a woman with no husband present grew over 50 percent nationwide and 38 percent in New York State.

What this means for schools is that many more children will come from single-parent homes. This may cause emotional problems difficult for teachers to cope with unless they have the assistance of a trained psychologist.

When a child comes from a two-parent family, the odds are now better than 50-50 that both parents are employed. Most working people work from 8 to 5, yet most schools operate from 8 to 2:30 or 9 to 3:30, leaving parents with the task of finding someone to watch their children before or after school or both, if they can afford it. Only recently have schools begun after-school programs designed specifically to assist working parents by keeping their child from 8 to 5.

Where do these trends lead us? How will demographic change affect rural schools in New York State? I leave you with five short predictions and one final comment.

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First, Americans are continuing to disperse into the rural areas. This will hurt the big cities as their economic base shrinks, but will help the amenity-rich smaller communities. People are likely to continue to act on their preferences for a recreational lifestyle and a less densely settled pattern of living, and technology and a dispersed business structure will enable more of them to act on their preferences.

Second, the number of little children is on the rise. But while the number of births is up, the birth rate is at a record low, so it is likely that there will be only modest increases in the elementary school population.

Third, the number of teenagers is most assuredly declining. We call this the baby bust, and as a result the number of high school students will shrink and some colleges and universities will have a difficult time surviving.

Fourth, a larger majority of the adult population and a larger fraction of the labor force are women. Many of these women are single parents. It will be harder to find school volunteers, and the need for after school programs will be greater.

Fifth, the number of students may diminish, but the number of students with emotional problems because of separation or divorce at home is likely to increase.

Finally, my comment: I use past demographic trends to predict the near term future. About some things, like the decline in teenagers I am sure; about other things I'm not so sure; and for the long term, I'm not sure about anything.

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Demographic trends can self destruct. Today's generation of children is the first to be raised in a society where divorce is commonplace, where couples live together outside of marriage, and where single-parent families are growing faster than two-parent families.

When these children become adults they may reject current lifestyles as every generation seems to reject the one before it. They may dream about finding a sweetheart, marrying for life, having a big family, and putting down roots. It seems unlikely, but today's trends were unbelievable only a decade ago.

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